

Determining the Reading Medium for Students with Visual Handicaps

Alan J. Koenig
Texas Tech University

Mary Jean Sanspree
University of Alabama at Birmingham

M. Cay Holbrook
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Introduction

The Division for the Visually Handicapped (DVH) of the Council for Exceptional Children places a high value on literacy for all persons. The ability to communicate effectively through speaking, listening, reading, and writing to the extent of one's abilities is of fundamental importance in achieving assimilation into society. Perhaps the most vital component of the total communication process is reading, a skill highly regarded by members of our society. Reading is of equal importance and value for individuals with visual handicaps. An efficient reading medium, or set of mediums, facilitates literacy and integration into social, learning, and work environments and provides individuals with a recreational skill that cannot be replaced with television, radio, or other media.

For most persons without visual handicaps, a choice of reading medium is not necessary since the printed word is expected and is a universal method of expressing language. However, for children with visual handicaps the decision regarding the appropriate reading medium is not as straight forward or predetermined in any way. Since our society measures literacy by the ability to demonstrate effective reading and writing skills, much attention must be devoted to making appropriate decisions concerning the mediums by which each person with a visual handicap will read and write.

There has been ample discussion recently in the political arena as to the superiority of one reading medium over another medium for students who are legally blind. Such discussion, however, does not reflect a full appreciation for the complexities of students with visual handicaps. *There can be no predetermined reading medium for all students within an arbitrary category and still uphold the principle of educating each student according to his or her individual capabilities and needs.* To prevent a child from learning to read in print who has the capability to do so is indeed a barrier to achieving literacy. Likewise, to prevent a child from learning to read in braille who has the potential to make it a more efficient medium than print reading is an equally damaging barrier to achieving literacy. The task of educators is to provide instruction in the reading mediums which will allow a child to ultimately become a literate adult, not to restrict opportunities for achieving literacy by failing to match a child's existing abilities with the appropriate learning mediums.

This paper will state the position of DVH regarding the determination of the reading medium for students with visual handicaps. It will not, however, provide specific guidelines for making such decisions since this information has been presented by others (Gardner & Corn, 1991; Koenig & Holbrook, 1989, 1991; Mangold & Mangold, 1989) and since such a discussion falls outside of the scope or purpose of this paper.

Statement of Principles

DVH believes that a decision regarding the appropriate reading medium is based on a set of fundamental principles that reflect the individuality and unique learning characteristics of each student with a visual handicap. These principles are outlined in the following statements:

1. Each student with a visual handicap must receive an education based on individual needs and abilities, and the determination of the appropriate reading medium is but one of many critical decisions;
2. Each student should receive consideration for services by an educational team, including parents and a teacher of students with visual handicaps, who are knowledgeable of the student's unique abilities and needs;
3. Students with visual handicaps possess a wide range of learning characteristics that are so unique in themselves that no global statements can be established for the total population, or even sub-populations, of students;
4. The choice of a student's reading medium should be based on his/her individual learning characteristics and should not be dictated by political groups and others not directly involved with that student's welfare;
5. Each student with a visual handicap should be assured that decisions regarding the reading medium are based on observed sensory/overall functioning and not on arbitrary criteria such as the student's visual acuity or legal definitions of visual handicaps;
6. Reading in print and reading in braille have equal value when decisions are made on the needs of an individual student and with deliberate professional judgment;
7. The value of one reading medium over another is not a matter of which is intrinsically "better" or "more valuable"; the important factor is the degree of care that is taken in matching the appropriate reading medium with the student's individual sensory and learning capabilities and needs;
8. The determination of a primary reading medium is based on the student's unique sensory capabilities and ability to receive information through those channels to read efficiently, as well as other factors including the stability and prognosis of the visual condition and implications of additional disabilities;
9. For students who show a preference for gathering information visually and who can develop efficient reading skills through the visual channel, primary consideration should be given to instruction in reading in print because of the ready availability of print in our society;
10. For students who show a preference for gathering information tactually and who do not have sufficient visual functioning to develop efficient reading skills in print, primary consideration should be given to instruction in reading in braille;

11. Instruction in both reading in braille and reading in print may be necessary and appropriate for some students as determined by the educational team;
12. Educational teams should continually review the student's reading and writing medium(s) to determine whether additional medium(s) are needed to assure readiness for future needs;
13. Students with visual handicaps should have communication tools to assure independence, flexibility, and privacy, so they are not dependent solely on electronic technological devices;
14. Students with other handicapping conditions in addition to visual handicaps may not be able to read or write in either braille or print, but must have valid and functional modes of expression which are matched with their individual capabilities;
15. Educators providing communication skills instruction should have professional training and qualifications to guarantee use of appropriate teaching techniques and evaluation for each student with a visual handicap.

Position

The position of the Division for the Visually Handicapped on determining the reading medium is clear: Each student with a visual handicap has individual abilities and needs upon which decisions are made by an educational team as to the most appropriate reading medium or mediums. DVH does not advocate the superiority of one medium over another--such global, arbitrary answers are simply not possible. Rather, DVH realizes and understands the individuality of each student and the primary importance of matching a reading medium to individual needs. The implementation of this position is something that will require problem solving, family involvement, and professional judgments by those who are responsible for the education of students with visual handicaps.

References

Gardner, L. R., & Corn, A. L. (1991). Low vision: Access to print. Reston, VA: Division for the Visually Handicapped/Council for Exceptional Children.

Koenig, A. J., & Holbrook, M. C. (1989). Determining the reading medium for students with visual impairments: A diagnostic teaching approach. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 83, 296-302.

Koenig, A. J., & Holbrook, M. C. (1991). Determining the reading medium for visually impaired students via diagnostic teaching. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 85, 61-68.

Mangold, S., & Mangold, P. (1989). Selecting the most appropriate learning medium for students with functional vision. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 83, 294-296.

Definition of Student with a Visual Handicap:

Proposed Rule Revision

- (1) A student who is visually handicapped is one who:
 - (A) has been determined by a licensed ophthalmologist or optometrist to have no vision or to have a serious vision loss after correction. The visual loss should be stated in exact measures of visual field and correct visual acuity at distance and near in each eye. The report should also include prognosis whenever possible. If exact measures cannot be obtained, the eye specialist must so state and give best estimates; and
 - (B) has been determined by the following assessments to have a need for special services:
 - (i) a functional vision evaluation by a professional certified in the education of students with visual handicaps or a certified orientation and mobility instructor. The evaluation must include the performance of tasks in a variety of environments requiring the use of both near and distance vision and recommendations concerning the need for a clinical low vision evaluation and an orientation and mobility evaluation; and
 - (ii) a learning media assessment by a professional certified in the education of students with visual handicaps. The assessment must include recommendations concerning which specific visual, tactual, and/or auditory learning media are appropriate for the student and whether or not there is a need for ongoing assessment in this area.
- (2) A student who is visually handicapped is functionally blind if, based on the above assessments, the student will use tactual media (which includes braille) as a primary tool for learning to be able to communicate in both reading and writing at the same level of proficiency as other students of comparable ability.